

A NOTE TO REGIMENTAL MEDICAL OFFICERS CALLED UPON TO LECTURE ON THE PREVENTION OF VENEREAL DISEASE AMONG TROOPS.

A few hints may perhaps be useful to medical officers called upon to lecture for the first time to troops on the prevention of venereal disease. Most medical officers of the Regular Army have learned by experience the type of talk which appeals to troops, but all have found it difficult at first to decide on how much should be said and how much should be left out.

It is common knowledge to them, however, that units vary greatly in their attitude to sex matters, and that a talk suitable for one unit may not be suitable for others.

Briefly in any large group of men there are three sub-groups:—

- (1) Those accustomed to promiscuity.
- (2) Those with little interest in sex.
- (3) A much larger group who although given to much free talk among themselves have little real experience of matters of sex.

It is this last sub-group that lectures and talks will profit most, and the majority of its members can be influenced in the right direction by the attitude taken by their medical officer, officers and N.C.Os.

Depending on the proportion of these groups in any unit, so should the medical officer's lecture be varied.

Always remember, however, that the great majority of the audience are decent lads both out to listen and learn all they can about a subject that interests them.

It may be pointed out that the majority of medical officers looking after Militia in two Commands in England were definitely of the opinion that too much insistence on sex questions and the danger of venereal disease would have done more harm than good, as most Militiamen were too interested in their new work and surroundings to have time

for much thought on sexual affairs. At a later date when the novelty had worn off another line might have had to be taken.

Certain civilian lecturers on this subject have found it useful to start a lecture with a simple talk on reproduction in general, starting with the amoeba and following on with Hydra, fishes, birds, mammals and finally the human being.

This talk is often illustrated by a short film. The lecturer points out the distinction between the instinctive reactions in the animal and the conscious thought and discrimination available alone to the human species. He points out that unfortunately owing to the impossibility of marriage at the age nature intended in most civilized countries, the natural instincts of man for reproduction must be suppressed for several years in the interest of the community. He emphasizes that this is possible without injury to health and that sublimation can be attained by concentration on games and general physical fitness, military duties and obligations, literature, hobbies and so on. Throughout this talk the lecturer tries to impress on the mind of his audience that copulation is only one process in nature's very large scheme of reproduction and the survival of the species. He points out that owing to lack of proper education on the subject it has been given undue prominence in the lay mind with very harmful results.

A few words on the above is a useful commencement to a lecture, as it is unexpected and captures the men's interest.

It is considered a mistake, however, to go into too much detail over such subjects as the anatomy of the organs of sex, the physiology of reproductive processes in the female, etc. Too much stressing of sex details although intended to be instructive may end in being merely pornographic and harmful.

The individual responsibility of each man to himself, his family, his unit and his country particularly in war time should be well rubbed in.

Following on this a short and simple description of the clinical signs of venereal diseases should be given and reference made to the possible after effects, not only to the patient but possibly to his wife and family. The picture should not be overpainted. A quiet statement of facts without exaggeration is more likely to influence an intelligent man than a visual description of horrors, which, not having seen, he cannot visualize. Such descriptions bore the average man and may induce phobias in sensitive men.

The effect of alcohol in upsetting normal sound judgment should be brought to notice as well as the fact that

alcohol is often responsible for men not using properly the preventive measures advised.

The vital importance of reporting sick directly signs of disease are suspected, the necessity for avoidance of self treatment or treatment other than by the proper medical authority, and the penalty in the Army for concealment of disease should be made a matter of common knowledge to every soldier.

The danger of brothels should be emphasized and it should be explained that however much these places are said to be controlled they are invariably most dangerous. At the same time it should be pointed out that women of loose morals, although not prostitutes, are equally dangerous, in fact more so, than the professional prostitute. The preventive methods in force in the Army should then be clearly detailed, and the necessity for strict attention to instructions should be stressed particularly as regards the time factor. It should be pointed out that these measures are only protective up to a point, and that the only safe rule to follow is abstention from irregular sex relations. A few last words of advice on lecturing. Be brief, simple and never high brow. Talk quietly and naturally. Know before you start the points you are going to make and make them confidently. Do not ask for questions after your lecture, but tell your men that if any of them want further information you will be glad to give it and that, as their medical officer, they can always take the opportunity to speak to you privately.

It is most important never to be coarse, and never to try to be funny. You may raise a cheap laugh, but you will at once have lost caste and your lecture has been valueless or harmful.

In addition to lectures to men separate talks should be given to officers and N.C.Os. and both groups should be advised how best to talk to their men on this subject. Quiet advice given by officers and N.C.Os. may be valuable adjuncts to your own, but if given by the uninformed or inexperienced may undo all your efforts. The effects of personal example on the minds of the troops should be given great prominence.

Lastly, unobtrusively take every opportunity to get to know personally the men of your unit. If you realize that their feeding, clothing, housing, cleanliness, general comfort, physical condition, and the general hygiene of their surroundings and themselves are matters of which you must know every detail, quite apart from looking after them when sick or wounded, you will see that, if you do your job properly, you will be brought in constant intimate personal

contact with them daily. Once troops have summed you up as a medical officer keenly interested in their welfare (and no one can do this better) they will lose their diffidence, speak freely to you on any subject, and take your advice. By using your influence on such occasions you may do more good in the long run for the health of your men than you have done by your more formal set lectures.